

Consequences - a Parent's Elixir for Fear

Consequences, I'm sitting here in my office having this rational then irrational conversation with Melinda about her foster daughter Kris. Kris had refused to go to class, the school called the juvenile officer and the incident escalated into an unnecessary crisis. I could tell that Melinda was dys-regulated just by the look in her eyes, so I let her rattle on for a while. I focused on my own self regulation. I knew from past experience that Melinda needed to verbalize all that had been running around in her head. This usually got her to a place of regulation. If I had said much to her it would have only prolonged her process. Sometimes too many words will perpetuate dys-regulation.

Kris is 14 years old and had been in therapy with me for 3 & ½ years. Parent rights were terminated for her and her younger brother. Kris then experienced a failed adoption. However her brother was adopted. She is now in a career foster home with the option for adoption. Kris has a second younger brother who still lives with her dad. She has a 10 month old younger sister who was born after parental rights were terminated. The sister was then adopted by her current foster family. Talk about a night mare of interrupted attachments and abandonment. I have been the care giver who has been with her consistently the most time this all started. Kris has also experienced three hospitalizations and has demonstrated the entire gambit of acting out behaviors that occur in these tragic situations.

Melinda told me that she needed to give Kris a consequence so Kris would learn that she would loose her make up when she doesn't go to class. I breathed and prayed myself back to regulation because I wanted to say, "Melinda, just ask Kris what will happen next time she doesn't go to class, I'm sure Kris would say she would loose her make up." I didn't go there because I realized I was reacting and not responding to Melinda's need at this time. Melinda was not regulated and continued to attempt to explain why a consequence was necessary. Melinda knew that I don't support consequences. Melinda is a "seasoned" foster parent. I introduced her to the stress model about nine months ago. She read Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control, watched some DVDs and listened to several CDs. She was "on board" immediately. I could tell that this model had already been seeded in her heart and it had been waiting to be birthed. But like most folks she struggled with how to put it into action. Besides her own unresolved fears regarding using the stress model she and I both had to "fight" the system. The school, juvenile office, family services, and respite foster care were working out of a fear based paradigm of consequences. I gave Melinda permission to give the consequence to Kris if that was what she needed. Her fear had driven her to a point of feeling out of control and she needed the consequence for her to feel better. Giving a consequence provides a sense of control. Needing control is always a function of some level of fear.

On a spiritual level this indicates to me that there is doubt, which is fear based, and a lack of trust that love is enough and never fails. 1 John 4:18 says "there is no fear

in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . .”. 1 Corinthians 13:8 says “love never fails.” Now that she had regained control she was more regulated. I continued to breathe. I explained that I wanted Melinda to understand that giving Kris a consequence was not necessarily going to keep Kris from missing class when she was dys-regulated. Melinda sort of nodded in agreement with me. At that point I considered Melinda as a little child that had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar and could not admit that she stole the cookie. Melinda, like the child, had a loaded gun to her head. Fear paralyzes us. When we’re “caught” so to speak, everything in our past that we have run from emotionally is still sitting there waiting to go off on us just like a loaded gun. We’re afraid that if we admit our wrong we’ll be punished because that’s what has usually happened to us for a wrong doing in the past. Because of her fear Melinda could not admit that she was wrong. She could not say that her dys-regulation had caused her to implement a fear-based consequence. But it did make her feel better. Just like lying about the stolen cookie, it makes the child feel better because they think they got away with it. Consequences.

My experience tells me that parents use the word consequence because it seems more socially acceptable than using the word punishment. Consequences, by definition are a logical chain of events. Is there logic in losing make up when you miss class? Scroll ahead 8 years and I’m sure that when Kris considers skipping class in college, she will attend class for fear of losing her make up. Pardon my sarcasm. Punishment on the other hand, is defined as suffering, pain, or loss that serves as retribution. The Webster Dictionary says that “punishment does not act as a reinforcer unless a person is working from their cognitive memory”. When we’re being punished most of us are in a fight or flight emotional state. Or the reason we’re in trouble is because we made a poor decision while dys-regulated. In either case, not much left brain is happening. Easton’s 1897 Bible Dictionary tells us that punishment is not primarily intended for the reformation of criminals, not for the purpose of deterring others from sin. The rest of the story with 1 John 4:18 “. . . there is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.” So by definition, consequences and punishments are not meant to do what parents want them to do - change or deter future unwanted behaviors. However, they both medicate a parent’s fear. Of course society supports this as well as most well intentioned behavior modification professionals. What is missing is discipline which is intended to teach internal controls. Proverbs 13:24 (New International Version): “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Proverbs 22:6 (The Message): “Point your kids in the right direction - when they’re old they won’t be lost.” Implicit in these verses is teaching and guiding, not retribution.

A week later Melinda came into my office and she was dys-regulated but in a different way. Her face said she was emotionally distraught, but not angry like last week when she was needing an elixir for her fear. Melinda told me that she had become very cold and shut down around Kris. She knew that this was not helpful and only precipitated more aggression and a need for control from Kris. Melinda’s desperation was that she did not want to be or to stay cold and shut down. She was afraid to come out because that had become a refuge for her. She was beating herself up over it. I said “we

need to just breathe through this for a minute” and she allowed me to help her regulate. “What you’re telling me, is that you have basically gotten worn out, burnt out and so for your own self preservation you have gone to a cold place.” She murmured “yes” as the tears welled up in her eyes and said, “That’s not a good place for me, but that is the only place I could be.” She went on to say she was not sure of what she needed to do. I said, she needed to just be. Moving forward comes after she honors where she was. I asked if I could help her do that at that moment. She was able to process through that emotional state. This week I had become safe enough for her to be vulnerable and to heal emotionally.

Kris had triggered some deep wounds in Melinda’s past. Melinda had become more aware of these and was working to heal. When you’re hurt and afraid of being hurt again it can be difficult to be in a state of love. I believe Melinda wanted to and was working to resolve her past hurts so she could be present to help Kris. I suggested that when she was regulated and felt like she can be vulnerable with Kris, to go to her and tell her, “Kris, I’m really sorry that the last week I was not a safe person for you to come to. I have not been able to provide you with a safe place. I apologize for that, and I am sorry you had to experience that. I was very emotional and I wasn’t in a safe place myself. I want you to know that I am working hard so we can get back to a place where you feel safe with me.” Even though it took Melinda about a week or so to get through her process, she was then able to go re-connect with Kris in love.

Another week went by. Now was the time to do an educational piece with Melinda and Kris. They came in for a session and I said, “Melinda, let me help you understand why Kris felt so rejected when you went to that cold place. I did a womb narrative with Kris - I told Kris some of her story when she was in the womb. A narrative helps re-create fragmented or suppressed pieces of a person’s life. A narrative can re-create part of a person’s life story that was preverbal. It can re-create an event that a child or adult remembers but could never put words to. As Kris allowed me to be with her in her process, I talked to her about how rejecting and cold her womb experience was and how coming into the world felt very unsafe and scary for her. That she must have felt that the world was not safe, and that she felt rejected by it. Kris was able to process that quite well. I then explained to Melinda that when she was in her cold place, it reminded Kris’s unconscious of Kris’s cold and rejecting womb experience. Melinda was able to understand the process Kris experienced as well as Kris’s reaction to her. I then told Melinda not to pile on herself anymore shame or guilt, but to embrace her own humanity and celebrate that she and Kris were able to heal. Melinda was now better equipped to discipline in love and facilitate healing. What beautiful consequences of our counseling.

Their journey together hit another crisis. Unfortunately this crisis started a deterioration in their relationship that I couldn’t stop. As I tell the story of what happened I do not mean in any way to be critical or judgmental of any person or social service system involved. Everyone involved with Kris and with the system they work for are in their own process. They are all functioning and doing the best they can at any given time. I merely want to point out that as a whole the systems that our children are in

fall short of meeting the children's needs. My hope and prayer is that my writing about this will stir others to make changes in the way they treat families and children in the same way that this information has stirred me to change what I do.

Melinda and Kris came into my office and it was obvious that both were very distraught and very angry. Melinda was wise enough to know to not stay in with me and Kris because she knew she was too upset to be helpful. I worked with Kris to get her regulated. I knew her well enough to realize that she felt like she was on the edge. That meant that she was fearful of falling into a deep dark hole where no one could reach her. I had been there with her several times before but it had never been this intense. She was able to stay with her feelings and do some processing and come back into feeling safe again. I then attempted to connect Melinda and Chris. As I look back on it now, this was a mistake in judgment on my part. I try not to second-guess myself too much because I, like others, are in my own process. This attempt failed miserably. Melinda "had" to get Kris to the juvenile office for a meeting. She also had other deadlines she "had" to meet with her other foster children. The clear message to Kris was that you don't have time for me in my time of desperate need. Since I couldn't fight city hall, I went to the juvenile office with Kris for support. Actually Kris did very well at the meeting. She stayed regulated and explained what had happened. I was extremely proud of her. She stated that she did not believe it would be helpful to go home with Melinda because she was afraid they would get into an argument again. Kris remained regulated and rationally stated exactly what her emotional safety needs were. Her caseworker was there and told her she had to go home with Melinda. There were no options. I'm sure the caseworker felt backed into a corner at that time and her fears caused her to threaten Kris to go with Melinda or be locked up. She didn't have the time to invest in Kris's emotional needs. There were other appointments she needed to be at. Again the clear message to Kris was that no one had time to help her in a time of desperate emotional need. Kris reluctantly got in the car with Melinda. I was stunned and stood there shaking my head. We had missed so many opportunities to connect with Kris. The caseworker couldn't look me in the eye. I knew it was best for me to leave and go back to my office. I was definitely not in a state of love at that time.

I had a few more sessions with Kris. Some of them had Melinda present for part of the session. Kris had retreated deep into her shell this time. I had seen her there many times over the course of our relationship. I did everything that I knew how to do to reconnect with Kris. Her trust had again been shattered by the system. She was not going to even let me, the person she probably trusted the most, inside that shell. I was gone to church camp for a week. During that time a family support team meeting was held. It is decided that since Kris was refusing to talk with me they would find her another counselor. It's probably just as well that I wasn't at the meeting because it would have been me against the system and their minds were already made up. It's at times like these that I turn to Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." I had to let go and trust that God's love would be enough.

I was able to have a final session with Kris for closure. We chatted briefly with some small talk about her activities and plans for the summer. I told her that I appreciated all that she had shared with me and that she had allowed me to be with her for so long on her journey. I then took responsibility for not being able to continue to be a safe person for. I apologized for that. I told her that I would try to learn from this experience so I could be safer for other children. I did this so that Kris would have to deal with her own internal consequences and not shift into immediate blame. These consequences are the natural consequences of guilt and shame that we all experience. Consequences and punishments implemented from an outside source keep us from dealing with ourselves. As long as we can blame someone else or something else for our problems, we stay stuck in fear. The blame game has been around forever. Take for example Adam and Eve. Genesis 1:1-5. In the garden, there was perfect love. There was peace, happiness, and joy. Then sin entered and the fall of man. Eve took a bite of the apple, and of course Adam blamed her, and Eve blamed the snake. So, I look at that and say, “hmmmm, isn’t that like us today?” When Adam and Eve were hiding God was looking for them. God asked them where they were. They answered that they were hiding because they were afraid. Man has tried to stay there ever since.

I want to stress that I am not blaming, judging, or criticizing any one involved with Kris. I’ve known and worked with most of those involved for years. They are all kind hearted, good willed, and well intentioned people. I merely want to point out what the element of fear does to us and how that interferes believing that love never fails. Fear is the oldest ploy of Satan. John 10:10 confirms this. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the fullest.”

Quotes and bio

“If you give a consequence to make yourself feel better, you need to explore the situation to find what moved you out of a state love into a state of anger or fear. If a consequence does not teach a cognitive or behavioral skill then it is a punishment.”
“Until you allow yourself to be where you are you will never get where you’re going.”

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